NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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No. 389. *Price, Five Cents.*

MERCEDES DANTON'S DOUBLE

OR A PLOT FOR MANY MILLIONS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

"You leave the son to me," said Isabel Benton. "He has just twenty-four hours to live!"
Nick Carter waited to hear no more.

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MERCEDES DANTON'S DOUBLE;

OR,

A Plot for Many Millions.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MERCEDES.

Nick Carter had just left the Waldorf-Astoria by way of the main entrance, on Thirty-fourth Street. He walked slowly toward Fifth Avenue and was in the act of turning the corner toward the southward when a carriage halted at the curb at a point about midway of the block.

The door of the carriage swung open and a woman appeared for one instant at the opening. At the same instant two men, who were passing and who happened to be directly abreast of the point where the carriage had halted, came to a sudden stop. One of them uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and anger and darted forward away from his companion and toward the woman who had not yet wholly emerged into view, and whose identity the detective could not determine.

It was evident that she discovered the man almost as soon as he saw her, for she uttered a little startled cry of consternation and leaped back into the carriage again.

At the same instant the driver, as if warned by her cry, and also as if prepared for just such an attack, brought the butt of his whip down with a sharp blow against the aggressor's head, and so jammed his hat over his eyes and almost felled him to the pavement. Then, reversing the whip, and using it to good advantage upon the horses, the vehicle was hurried away at a furious pace, and was soon out of sight around the corner of Thirty-third Street.

Nick witnessed the whole thing, which did not oc-

cupy more than three or four seconds of time; but during those few seconds he was steadily approaching nearer to the spot where it happened, so that by the time he reached it, the man with his hat over his eyes had succeeded in removing it. But he was standing with his back toward the detective, shaking his fist in the direction the carriage had gone and was swearing softly to himself.

Nick, however, recognized him at once, and he came to a halt, smiling, while he waited for the angry man to turn in his direction—which, after a moment of contemplative profanity, he did.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed instantly and impulsively, for he also recognized the detective; and he grasped Nick Carter's extended hand with a fervor which was as genuine as his rage had been a moment before.

"I say, Nick, old chap, did you see that?" he asked, rubbing his head ruefully.

"Yes," replied Nick, still smiling. "Nothing serious, I hope. Only one of your many adventures, eh, Danton? Really, I supposed you were serious when you told me not two weeks ago that you had turned over a new leaf. Or, is this a left over affair?"

"Left over affair! Didn't you see her?"

"No. I merely saw a woman—that is, I merely saw the costume of a woman, not the woman herself."

"Then you didn't recognize her?"

"Certainly not. Do I know her?"

"Know her! Say, will you wait here a second until I excuse myself to my companion, who was with me? I want to talk to you."

"Yes; I will wait."

Danton hurried away, made his excuses to the man who had halted a few feet distant and was awaiting him, and then returned to Nick Carter.

"Shall we go into the hotel, shall we walk, or shall we—what shall we do, Carter? I want dreadfully to talk with you."

"Let's walk. We can go in the direction of my house. That is where I was headed for when your episode of the carriage arrested my attention. Now, what is the matter, Danton?"

"Everything is the matter."

"Your reply is neither lucid nor comprehensive."

"No, I suppose not. I wish you had seen who it was who started to descend from the carriage."

"In that case, and as I did not see, or recognize the person, suppose you tell me who the lady was."

"It was my sister, Mercedes."

"Ah!" said Nick, and stopped. He was greatly astonished, but not a sign of his feelings appeared in his voice. He uttered the exclamation in exactly the same tone he would have used if Danton had said that the woman was the queen of Sheba, or the High Duchess of Benkakakiak.

"Ever since the murder of Ramon Orizaba,* about two weeks ago—it will be two weeks to-morrow, will it not?—one trouble has followed another until it seems almost as if the family and the home at Linden Fells is accursed. My mother was taken ill the day of the funeral. Her illness came on so suddenly that I cannot get it out of my head that she was poisoned. However, we sent her away at once, and she is better now. She is at Newport."

"Well?" said Nick.

"Well, Mercedes was preparing for an extended trip abroad, even before this misfortune came to the house. After the murder she was more determined than ever to go, and sought to hurry the preparations of her friends, who were to accompany her on the trip; but they did not hurry fast enough, so she resolved to start on alone, with only her two maids. In the meantime, Nick, she did not act at all like herself. I saw very little of her, and even that little was most unsatisfactory. She was strangely unlike herself."

"Did you not talk with her about it?"

"I tried to, but she wouldn't talk."

"But I supposed there was the utmost confidence and sympathy between you and your sister."

"So there always has been until now. The fact is, a week ago last night we quarreled."

"Not seriously, I hope?"

"N-no. That is, I did not regard it as serious at

*See the last issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "The Murder at Linden Fells."

the time, for we have had worse spats than that one, many a time. However, she disappeared the following day."

"What is that?" asked Nick, stopping abruptly in their walk. "Disappeared, you say?"

"Yes, that is what I said. We quarreled a week ago last night—Saturday night. Sunday morning I slept late, breakfasted alone, and came into the city almost immediately after. I did not return to the Fells until toward evening. When I arrived there she had gone."

"Gone where?"

"How do I know where? If I had known, I wouldn't have cared. I have neither seen nor heard a sign of her from that time till just now when that carriage drove up against the curb and she started to alight from it. Naturally, when the carriage stopped almost in front of me, I looked toward it. You can imagine my astonishment when I saw and recognized Mercedes. You saw what happened then."

"Yes. I saw what happened then. Are you sure that the lady was Mercedes?"

"Am I certain that you are you? I saw her as plainly as I see you now."

"Did you also recognize the coachman who struck you?"

"No."

"Did you see him at all, so that you would have recognized him if you had seen him?"

"Sure, I saw him—quite well enough to know him again, the next time I see him."

"And he was a stranger to you?"

"I do not remember that I ever saw him before."

"Did she—did the woman, whom you believed to be Mercedes, say anything to him when you started toward the carriage?"

"Not a word."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. Why?"

"Well, it seems strange that a coachman whom you do not know, and who, therefore, would not have been likely to have struck you without instructions, should do that very thing without orders. Now, please be particular, Danton. Is it not possible that you may be mistaken, and that the woman in the carriage was not Mercedes?"

"No; it is not possible. I saw her plainly."

"In that case, I do not see just why you wish to talk to me about the story."

"Good heavens, Carter! Don't you suppose I want to find my sister?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. But if that was your sister, it is quite evident that she does not want to find you, or care to have you find her. If the occupant of that carriage was Mercedes Danton, she had mighty good reasons for acting as she did, and I will tell you very frankly, Reginald, as between you and Mercedes, I will take her side of the question every time."

Reginald Danton took a quick step forward and turned, thus placing himself directly in front of the detective, so that both were obliged to come to a stop. Then he held out his hand and smiled.

"Shake," he said.

"Why?" asked Nick.

"On that last proposition—that, as between Mercedes and me, you will take her side of the question every time. That is what I want you to do. In other words, I don't care a fig whose side of the question you take, as long as it benefits her in the end. I love my sister better than anybody else in the world—better than everybody else in the world put together. She's in trouble of some kind, and I haven't any more idea what it is than the man in the moon; neither can I find out what it is any more than the same mythical personage. Mercedes left the house without a written word to anybody. She took one of her maids with her—a new one, who has been in her employ only a month or so, and she left word with the other one that she would write.

"She did not write. I supposed, of course, she had gone to Newport, where mother is, and on Wednesday I ran over there. She was not there, and had not been there. Mother did not even know that she was not at home, and I didn't enlighten her; and there you are. Mercedes went out of the house last Sunday, a week ago to-day, and——"

Danton stopped and brushed his eyes quickly. Then, with his tones filled with emotion, he said:

"The fact is, Nick, I've got a 'hunch,' as the race track people say. It never occurred to me till this very moment, but as sure as fate I believe that there is foul play somewhere. What you said about the coachman suggests it. Good God, Carter! do you suppose it could be possible that Mercedes did not leave home of her own free will?"

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE LEAVE-TAKING.

The detective strode on in silence for some distance before he replied, and than he said, very slowly:

"I have seen very little of your sister, Reginald, but what I have seen of her, and what I know of her character, assures me that she would never even consider the taking of a step of the kind you mention without good and sufficient reason. Furthermore, I feel sufficient personal interest in her to make it my duty to find her and ask her for her side of the story, so now, if you will come into the house and follow me to my room, I will ask you to tell me all you know about the affair up to the present moment. You may tell me first, what was the quarrel about?"

"You."

"Eh? What is that?"

"We quarreled about you."

"About me! Humph! I should like you to tell me the particulars of that quarrel, if you please."

"The whole thing did not really amount to a row of pins."

"Nevertheless, I should like to see the point of each pin."

"Your name has been mentioned very often between us, ever since the death of Orizaba."

"Well?"

"I could see, when you were there at that time, that—er—well, that you admired Mercedes very much, indeed."

"You were entirely correct in that decision."

"I could also see that she was especially drawn toward you; in short, that she admired you almost as much as you did her."

"I am very much pleased to hear you say that. I did not suppose that she had had time to remember my existence."

"It is a funny thing, Carter, that you can be so mighty shrewd about seeing things in one light, and still not be able to see a deuced thing in another—that is, from another and different point of view."

"That is a very ordinary human failing, Danton. But, go on."

"Mercedes has always held rather extraordinary ideas about love and marriage; about men, women and things socially, much to the annoyance of mother and to the amusement of my father. I think, Carter, that you almost came up to her idea of the ideal man."

"Nonsense, Danton!"

"I am speaking seriously. Please remember that I am talking of my sister."

"I do, my boy; but get down to the quarrel."

"I'm getting down to it. All this is a preamble which must be told in order that you may understand all of it—and in understanding it, I want you to be particular not to misunderstand anything I may say."

"You are rather obscure just now."

"Not intentionally. In order to explain so that you will understand, I must confess to you that I made her believe that I thought she was more than half in love with—you."

"In other words, you bantered her upon what you knew to be untrue; you merely teased her because you had discovered a theme which did tease."

"Exactly."

"Well?"

"It was all raillery, you know. Just making fun."

"Yes."

"And, in doing so, in order to tease her the more, I did not hesitate to make fun of you."

"Naturally."

"In short—you know I want to be entirely frank with you. That is one of my few virtues, frankness, is it not? In short, at the time when we quarreled, I

permitted myself to speak slightly of you. Quite so, in fact."

"Suppose you tell me what you said."

"I say, Carter, that's mean, you know, to make me tell what I said."

"You have already explained why you said the things you did say."

"I know, but they will sound differently now, repeated in cold blood."

"Tell me what you said about me to your sister. I want to know all about the quarrel."

"Well, if I do, you will have to promise me first that you will forgive, beforehand, all that I shall say."

"Certainly, Danton. I understand perfectly, that you were only teasing your sister, and I know something about the lengths to which brothers will go on occasions of that kind, as well as some of the liberties they will take, not alone with their sister themselves, but also with any other person who happens to be under discussion. Believe me, I will take all that you said in an utterly impersonal manner."

"Well, I accused her of being in love with you, of course."

"Yes. And then?"

"I told her that you were a widower, but——"

"Go on."

"Confound it, I can't! I simply explained in my own way, which won't bear repeating now, that you had worshiped your first wife, and that you would wear sackcloth and ashes the rest of your days—please forgive me, old man!—and that there was no hope that another could ever take her place in your heart."

"I see nothing to offend me about that statement. What next?"

"Why, then I made fun of your profession. I asked her how she would like to be known as Mrs. Detective Carter, and all that, don't you know—and I kept at it until I got her thoroughly angry."

"Well?"

"She told me that if I were half the man that Nick Carter is, people would have a lot more respect for me, which I admitted, and that if she loved a man it would make no difference to her whether he was a detective, or what he was, so long as he was a good and honorable man, who did his duty to his neighbor and to himself, and all that. Really, she read me quite a lecture, until I'm blowed if she didn't get me mad, too."

"She told you a few facts, I suppose."

"Facts! Good Heaven! You ought to have heard her. I felt like a kitten in the grasp of a bull terrier, before she got through with me."

"And then——?"

"Well, among other things she told me that I belonged to a class that was ruining posterity, whatever that may mean, inasmuch as posterity isn't here to be ruined; that I had never earned a cent of money in my life, and that all on earth I was good for was to spend the money which my father provided—and a whole lot more of that sort until I left her in a rage. That is all; but you can see that the quarrel was not serious."

"That was Saturday afternoon?"

"Yes."

"And you did not see her again?"

"No. I came into the city in the evening, and I did not go out home until late. Then, in the morning, Sunday, I slept late, breakfasted alone, and came into town again. She went away Sunday."

"And you say she left no written message?"

"No."

"But she left a verbal one with one of the maids?"

"Yes."

"What was that message—just as it was repeated to you."

"Simply that she was going away, and that she would write."

"Nothing more?"

"Not a thing."

"She took one maid with her?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"Eh?"

"What else did she take with her?"

"Pretty nearly everything she owned, I should say."

"Do you mean that she took all of her trunks?"

"Yes; all of her own and some of mother's as well."

"How many in all?"

"Good gracious, Carter, you don't suppose I have kept tabs on the number of trunks those two women own, do you? I only know what the maid told me about it."

"Well, what did she tell you?"

"She said that it seemed strange that my sister had taken the new maid, who was not entirely accustomed to her ways, and left her behind, who knew all about her, particularly when she was intending to be gone for a long time—but that she thought it stranger still that her mistress had said nothing to her about her intention of going."

"Ah! The maid who was left behind did not know that your sister intended to go that day, then?"

"No."

"Where was she when Mercedes started away?

"Where was she when the many trunks were being made ready for the journey?"

"She had been sent into the city on an errand. The trunks had left the house when she returned and she was only just in time to see my sister depart."

"What was it she said to you about the trunks?"

"Merely that she thought it strange that her mistress had taken so many trunks and so many things with her."

"In short, Danton, the maid told you those things simply to give you an opportunity to question her."

"By Jove, Carter, I believe now that she did that very thing. She wanted me to question her."

"Which proves that she knew many things which she believed you should know, but which her position forbade her from volunteering to tell."

"Yes. I see it now. But it is better as it is, for I would have garbled the whole thing. Now, you will question her, and so get at the core of the thing."

"I hope so, Danton—I hope so."

CHAPTER III.

MERCEDES' FLIGHT FROM HOME.

The encounter between the detective and Reginald Danton took place shortly before dark on the evening of the last Sunday in June and, therefore, at about six o'clock.

After an hour passed together, during which Danton could give Nick but little more in the way of information than that which has already been recorded, the young man took his departure and the detective was left alone to think over the incidents of the afternoon.

He had agreed with young Danton that he would go out to the Fells early the following day and there hold an interview with the maid, and after looking over the ground more thoroughly, would determine if there really existed any reason why he should search for the temporary hiding place of Mercedes Danton.

"You see," he said, in conclusion, in talking with his friend, "it is one thing if she has been induced to leave home through any undue influence, and it is another if she has simply gone away of her own free will. But I agree with you, Danton, for from what I know of your sister, I do not think she would do such a thing, when there is, or appears to be, no reason for her action."

When, however, Danton had taken his departure, and the detective was seated alone in his room, he went slowly over the ground that had already been covered, much more deliberately than he had done while the young millionaire was with him.

His first remark, too, made to himself in the privacy of his own den, demonstrated the general trend of his conjectures.

"Mercedes Danton never left her home in that manner of her own free will," he said aloud. "I am as positive of that point as if she had told me so herself. Now, let me see what I already know about the circumstances surrounding her, in her home, which might lead to some clew for the reasons of her going. I'll go back first to the killing of Orizaba.

"Ramon Orizaba was reputed to be a distant rela-

tive. He was killed by Paul Rogers, who was Reginald Danton's valet. Letters found among the effects of Orizaba showed that he had been pursued by a Nemesis for upward of ten years, but they do not demonstrate clearly why. Rogers had been in the employ of Danton for about two years—something more, I believe. I found the whole family rather reticent about both Orizaba and Rogers, and while at the time I attributed that reticence to mere family pride, it now appears that there might have been another reason for it.

"After the murder, Rogers left a letter for Danton in which he confessed the murder, told how he did it, refused to tell why he did it—and then he disappeared. Since that time not a trace of Rogers has been discovered. He disappeared off the face of the earth almost as completely as if he had gone to the edge of it and jumped off.

"Next: When young Danton was describing to me the death of Orizaba, he referred, in an abstract way, to some pretentions to the hand of Mercedes which Orizaba had made. That was a matter which I had no occasion to inquire into at the time, and now, of course, it is too late to do so. Danton would resent it; Mercedes would resent it; their mother would resent it—and, in fact, at the present moment at least, I can think of no good excuse for doing so.

"Next: If I am any reader of character at all, I must concede that Mercedes and her brother appeared to love each other with a fondness that is unusual, and it was certainly sincere on both sides. Now it is absurd to suppose that the quarrel which took place between the brother and sister had anything whatever to do with the fact of her leaving home, it was merely an incident; and——

"Next: There is only one feature of the case that has come under my observation or knowledge which is at all significant, and that is that Mercedes should cry out in alarm upon seeing her brother on the street, should retreat back into her carriage and drive hastily away, and that her coachman should strike him.

"Now: I do not believe that Mercedes Danton would dodge any living person on earth—I think she is made of the stuff that would dare to face anybody or anything at any time or place. In other words, if ever I saw a young woman upon whose character was stamped every indication of courage, Mercedes Danton was that woman. Again: If Mercedes had left home willingly and taken all that baggage with her, she would not have remained in the city of New York at this time of the year, and hence she would not have been where her brother could have encountered her, and if such an encounter really took place, Mercedes would not seek to avoid it, and, least of all, would she have instructed her driver to strike her brother with his whip.

"Ergo: The woman in the cab was not Mercedes Danton. Reginald, for some reason, believed her to be his sister, and for some reason also, the woman, whoever she was, considered it imperative that she should avoid an interview with Reginald.

"Now, there is not a circumstance connected with this whole affair which should induce me to investigate it, if I regard it purely from a professional standpoint; but, on the other hand, if I regard it from a personal standpoint, considering myself the friend of Reginald—or shall I confess it to myself?—considering myself as solicitous only for the welfare of Mercedes herself, there is every reason why I should at least satisfy myself that all is well—or, rather, that nothing is wrong."

Nick Carter had just arrived at this decision when he was told that a client awaited him in the reception room, and he descended quickly, to find there a woman, who rose from her chair and bowed respectfully to him when he entered the room.

"I do not know if you will remember me, Mr. Carter," she said, coming at once to the point, "and I hardly know, sir, how to explain the reason for my coming here at all. I fear that you will consider it a great liberty for me to take not only with your time, but with the affairs of my mistress."

"I remember you very well," replied Nick, "although I never heard your name. You are a maid to Miss Mercedes Danton. Concerning your coming here, make your mind easy at once, for I already know why

you are here, and I am glad you have come. I should have gone out to the Fells in the morning to talk with you."

"Did I understand you to say that you know why I have come, sir?" she inquired, evidently greatly surprised.

"Yes. Mr. Reginald Danton has told me that his sister left home a week ago, rather mysteriously. Now, if you please, I will ask you some questions, and I would rather you would confine what you have to tell to me, to the replies to those questions. If, after we have finished, there should be other things which you would like to touch upon, do so. First, then, suppose you tell me your name."

"Sarah Kearney, sir."

"How long have you been in the employ of Miss Danton?"

"Ten years. I have served her since she was a little girl, nine years old."

"Good. And you were quite deeply in her confidence, were you not?"

"She told me almost everything, sir—until quite lately."

"Do you mean that she has partly withdrawn her confidence of late?"

"Yes, sir. Partly."

"Since when?"

"Since just before the mur—the death of Mr. Orizaba."

"You think her manner altered toward you, about that time, or just before his death?"

"No, sir, I cannot say that her manner altered; only I am certain that there was some sorrow or trouble on her mind which she did not tell to me."

"I see. And before that, or rather up to that time, she had been in the habit of confiding her troubles to you?"

"Always, sir."

"Now let us take a back step for a moment: Tell me just why you came to see me to-night."

"Why, sir, you have already said that you know."

"I know the reason for your wanting assistance, but I do not know why you selected me to render that assistance. For example, if this occasion had arisen a month ago, you would not have come here to me about it, would you?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because I did not know you then, sir."

"Neither did you know me now. Had you never heard the name of Nick Carter before the time of the death of Orizaba?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!"

"Well, then there is some reason other than you have stated, why you have come here. Now see if you can tell me what it is."

"Only what Miss Mercedes herself said to me."

"Ah! Well, what was that?"

"Why, only a few days before she went away she told me——"

"Tell me her exact words if you can."

"'Sarah,' she said, 'if the time should ever come when anything should happen to me which you cannot explain, go to Mr. Carter and ask him to help you.' That was all she said, sir. I asked her why she said such things, and she only smiled, and replied that she knew you would be her friend if she should need one."

"Very good," replied Nick. "Now come down for the present to the day she went away. How did it happen that you were not present at the time she packed her trunks?"

"She sent me away, to the city, early in the day, sir, on an errand which took me all the day. I did not get back until just before dark. She had already entered her carriage to drive to the station."

"And the trunks had already gone, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that your return surprised her? That she expected to be gone before your return?"

"Yes, sir. I was impressed by that idea."

"And that she sent you on that fruitless errand for the explicit purpose of getting you out of the house while she was making her preparations for leaving?"

"Yes."

"Was the other maid in the carriage with her when

you arrived at the house at the moment of her departure?"

"Yes."

"What is her name?"

"Isabel Benton."

"Rather a high sounding name for a maid, eh? We will return to her, presently. I shall want to know more about her."

"Well, sir, it won't be much. Nobody could tell anything about her. She was a puzzle."

"Indeed? I like puzzles—of that sort. Now let us return to your mistress. How did she appear when you saw her in the carriage. Was she pale?"

"I could not say, sir. Her veil was drawn tightly over her face so that I could not see her features."

"Yet you are certain that it was your mistress?"

"Why, of course, sir."

"But why, of course?"

"Just that it was her. I saw the carriage—the door was already closed and the coachman was on the point of starting the horses when I came up the walk. There was a small trunk on the box with the coachman, and I suspected that Miss Mercedes was going away, so I called to him to wait and ran forward before they started."

"Good. Did she seem annoyed because you delayed them?"

"She seemed in a hurry, sir. In fact, she said that she was in a hurry."

"Tell me what she said to you."

"'Sarah,' she said, 'I am in great haste. Tell my brother that I will write to him. I will also write to you.'"

"'Will you not send for me to come to you?' I asked her. 'It will be the first time you have been without me in ten years.' I urged; and she replied: 'Perhaps.' That was all. She was gone before I had a chance to say anything more."

"Did you recognize her voice?"

"Of course."

"Was she not coughing or laughing, or did she not hold her handkerchief over her mouth and nostrils while she was speaking to you?"

"Goodness, sir, how could you know that? Yes, sir, just before she spoke to me she put her handkerchief under her veil and——"

"And talked through it when she spoke to you. Very good, Sarah, I am beginning to think that your mistress had already gone when—but we won't anticipate."

CHAPTER IV.

LITTLE STRAWS SHOW THE DIRECTION OF THE WIND.

"Do you mean, sir," asked Sarah, "that it might not have been my mistress who was in the carriage when I supposed that I was bidding her good-by?"

"Yes. I mean that it might not have been your mistress, although we must act for the present on the hypothesis that it was she. Supposing that it was, the fact of her holding her handkerchief to her mouth while she was talking to you would lead one to suppose that she had some reason for wishing to conceal some emotion from you, would it not?"

"I suppose so. I had not thought of that."

"No. I suppose you stood there and watched the carriage until it was out of sight?"

"Yes."

"Then you went into the house and went directly to her rooms, did you not?"

"Yes."

"What was the condition of the rooms?"

"I never saw them in such confusion, sir."

"Showing that the packing had been done quite hastily; is that the idea?"

"It is, sir."

"Who did the packing? Of course, you inquired."

"Naturally. Isabel Benton must have done it all, sir."

"Unless her mistress helped her, you mean."

"Nobody else helped her, sir. She ordered the trunks brought to the rooms, and they were packed there. Nobody helped her."

"What was packed?"

"That is what surprises me, sir. I have never known Miss Daniel to take so many things away with her

before. Her own trunks were not sufficient. She took three trunks which belong to her mother."

"What was put into the trunks?"

"Almost every bit of her wardrobe. She took a great many things which she has not used of late and which I know she had discarded for good, and she took one dress which I have heard her say she would never wear under any circumstances."

"What else?"

"Why, books, trinkets, keepsakes—a mass of things, sir, which she never noticed or cared for at all—and she cleaned out her writing desk, which hitherto she has only locked when we have been going away."

"What else?"

"Well, sir—and this I cannot explain at all—she took every photograph of herself that the house contained."

"What is that? Her own photographs?"

"Yes, sir. I noticed, first, that one that she had given to me was missing. Then I began to look for others. There is not a picture of her left in the house. She even went into her brother's, her mother's and her father's rooms and took photographs from there."

"Her own?"

"Her own and theirs as well."

"That is rather remarkable. Was she fond of her own pictures, do you think?"

"Not at all. She paid almost no attention to them. She never kept a photograph of herself exposed to view in her own room."

"Who took the trunks to the station?"

"The men at the stable, sir."

"How many trunks were there?"

"Eleven."

"Do you know to what place those trunks were checked?"

"Yes, sir. I asked. They were checked to New York."

"Which tells us nothing, and which can never tell us anything, I expect, since an entire week has elapsed since that time. Sarah, did the other servants in the house know that she was intending to go away that day?"

"Nobody knew it until she began sending for her trunks."

"Now, let us return to the moment when she sent you on that errand to New York."

"Very well, sir."

"How did she appear when she gave you your orders about that?"

"I did not see her then, sir."

"Not see her? How was that?"

"She sent the order to me by Isabel."

"Ah! Did you see your mistress at all that day—Sunday?"

"No, sir, I did not. Isabel attended her."

"When did you see her last?"

"Saturday night, sir."

"At what time?"

"I assisted her when she retired."

"Where was Isabel, the other maid, at that time?"

"Walking on the piazza, I think. She was not in the room."

"Who usually attended your mistress when she retired?"

"I sir, always."

"And when she rose in the morning?"

"I did, when she required anybody. Often she was up, dressed and out of the house before I was awake. She loved to be in the garden in the early morning."

"Did she go into the garden Sunday morning?"

"No, sir. She did not leave her rooms all day, while I was in the house."

"How does it happen that you did not go to her in her rooms?"

"Isabel told me that she had directed that we were both to remain outside. She said that Miss Mercedes was not feeling well, and did not wish to be disturbed, and that she would ring if she wanted either of us. Two rings were for Isabel and one was for me.—She rang for Isabel twice, I think—for me, not at all."

"Was it her custom to exclude you from her rooms?"

"She never did such a thing before since I have been in her service."

"How do you account for it this time?"

"I do not account for it at all, sir."

"What time were you sent away on the errand?"

"About noon, sir."

"What was the errand?"

"I was sent to see a woman who had been recommended to us—or, rather, to Miss Danton—as one who could do fine sewing beautifully. I was to talk with her, and, if she seemed satisfactory, to engage her services; but the address was evidently incorrect, for no such person lived there. It was in Brooklyn, so I had a long distance to travel, but I made good time and so caught a train back to the Falls half an hour quicker than I otherwise would have done."

"I see. You were sent on a wild-goose chase after an imaginary person in order to get you out of the house while the packing was going on, and it was intended that you should not return until after it was all over, and she had gone, too."

"It would seem so, sir."

"The last time you saw your mistress was when you put her to bed, Saturday night?"

"Yes."

"How did she appear then?"

"As usual."

"Not troubled by anything, so far as you could determine?"

"No more than had been the general rule of late."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, she had not been exactly the same since—well, sir, it seems an odd circumstance for a comparison of dates in regard to my mistress, but it occurs to me that she had not been exactly the same since about the time when Paul Rogers entered the service of Mr. Reginald, as his valet."

"It is an odd circumstance to use as a comparison, Sarah. I would like you to tell me exactly why you do so."

"Because of a very trivial thing, sir. I happened to be standing in the hallway of the house when Mr. Reginald returned from Europe and brought his new valet with him. Miss Mercedes came out from the drawing room to welcome her brother, and after he had passed on up the stairs she remained there talking with me until the valet came in with some of the luggage. She turned to see who it was who had entered, and when her eyes lighted upon the face of the valet, she uttered a sudden cry of alarm, and staggered back into my arms; but she barely touched them before she had straightened up again. There was not the slightest outward sign of emotion on her face, either.

"The valet stepped toward her, bowed, and said in those peculiar, soft tones of his, that he was sorry he had frightened her, and she replied by laughing and telling him it was nothing at all."

"And she offered no explanation?"

"None at all."

"Did any occur to you?"

"Only that I thought she had not heard him and was really startled."

"You mean that you thought that at the time; but that afterward you changed your mind?"

"No, sir. I did not change my mind."

"Do you think that she recognized in the valet a person whom she had seen and known before?"

"Yes; I think so now."

"Why?"

"Because—well, I have no good reason, only that many times since then I have seen her look strangely at the valet when she did not know that she was observed."

"How, strangely? What do you mean by that?"

"I scarcely know."

"Did she seem to fear him?"

"No; rather to be studying him."

"You are of the opinion that she had seen him somewhere before?"

"Either that, or he was strangely and unaccountably like some person she had known."

"Now you have said that she had not been exactly the same since that time. In what way was she different?"

"That is a difficult question to answer, for the reason that there was no difference which I could explain. There would have been no difference at all to

anyone less intimately associated with her than I was. But there was a difference."

"Can you not give me some idea about it?"

"Only that after encountering him anywhere in the house or in the garden, she would appear, for a short interval, to be in a mood of abstraction."

"As if she were endeavoring to recall something that was half forgotten?"

"No; not that. More as if she were trying to explain something to her own satisfaction."

"Did he ever address her or she him, save on the mere formalities of the household?"

"Never that I know about."

"Did his presence ever seem to frighten her?"

"Nothing ever frightened her, sir. She possessed the courage and the self-control of a man."

"Do you think his presence annoyed her?"

"No; I think it only puzzled her."

"Well, Sarah, we will leave Rogers for a moment and return to Isabel. I want a word or two about her."

"Very good, sir."

"I see that you did not like her, but it is possible that your dislike may have been the result of jealousy rather than have arisen from any really good reason, so I wish you to make an effort to disabuse your mind of anything but justice in replying to my questions about her."

CHAPTER V.

THE BEAUTIFUL FACE OF ISABEL.

"When did Isabel Benton first make her appearance in the household?"

"About a year ago—perhaps a little more."

"Who recommended her?"

"I do not know. She came one afternoon and entered at once upon her duties. Nobody offered me any word of explanation and I sought none."

"Naturally. Did her duties conflict with yours at all?"

"Not at all. I attended my mistress' person. Isabel was more of a waiting maid, constantly in attendance. My duties were in the bedchamber and with the wardrobe; hers were entirely general."

"Still you were jealous."

"I suppose so. I thought Isabel unnecessary. There was nothing to do that I could not attend to."

"Exactly. Isabel is rather beautiful, as I remember her. I saw her, I think, when I was there."

"Yes; she is very beautiful—for a maid."

"I did not talk with her at all, so you must tell me how she appeared. I got the impression that she looked rather above her station; did she appear that way at all?"

"Yes; I think she did."

"How?"

"She is an educated young woman. I think, sir, that she had seen better days."

"You think, then, that she had not always been a maid?"

"I think she had never been a maid to anybody until she came there to serve."

"Ah! I see. Rather that she was one who had enjoyed being waited upon instead of performing the part of a servant herself."

"Exactly that, sir. I would like to ask you, sir, if you looked at her very closely when you were at the Falls."

"No; I barely noticed her at all."

"Then, perhaps, you did not notice that there was really a striking resemblance between her and Miss Mercedes."

"I certainly did not."

"You saw enough of her to remark that she was beautiful."

"Yes; but it was a fleeting glance in the half light of the drawing room when I happened to meet her in the doorway. I merely caught a glimpse of her face. It was her poise and figure that attracted my attention, as well as the delicate profile of her face."

"Then you would not notice the resemblance, for it was not observable in her profile."

"But you think there was a resemblance?"

"A decided one, sir, when you got the correct view, and that was straight in front. But I noticed it on

one occasion particularly, and I gave her a severe scolding at the time, too."

"When and how was that?"

"I found her dressed in one of Miss Mercedes' party dresses once. Miss Mercedes had gone to a reception in the city, and the other members of the family were also away from home. By a strange chance very few of the servants were in the house, and I was, myself, supposed to be attending my mistress in New York. But it happened that I was taken with a headache at the last moment, and, instead of going to the city, was sent to my room to rest. At nine o'clock in the evening I awoke from a long sleep, and, feeling much better, went down the stairs to the library to find something to read. I had to pass through the drawing room on my way to the library, and you may imagine my surprise when I entered to see—as I supposed—my mistress standing before one of the long mirrors in the room.

"The carpet is very thick and soft, and she did not hear me as I approached behind her, so that I had a good view of her face in the mirror, and, Mr. Carter, I actually believed it to be Miss Mercedes—until she spoke.

"I uttered an exclamation of surprise at finding her there, whereupon she wheeled like lightning and confronted me. Even then the resemblance was so startling that I was not sure that she was not my mistress; but she saw that she was fairly caught, and she burst into tears, which she probably knew would be the surest way of winning me over to promise that I would not betray her."

"And she did win you over so that you never spoke of the circumstance, I suppose?" said the detective.

"I have never spoken of it till now, sir."

"Tell me what she said at the time, in explanation of her conduct."

"I don't remember much that she said, sir. She talked a steady stream for half an hour, and it was chiefly about there having been a time when she had finery of her own, and was a welcome guest at receptions such as the one where our mistress had gone. The dress she had put on was one which I had brought out for Miss Mercedes to wear, but which she had laid aside for another that she preferred. It had not been laid away again—was, in fact, on the bed when Isabel found it, and determined to see how she would appear with it. I was sorry for her. She could wheedle anybody with her voice."

"Ah! Her voice. Tell me about that."

"Her voice is very soft and low. Not like any other voice I ever heard, and yet, strangely enough, always remindful of a voice you have heard somewhere. Don't you know voices of that kind, sir?"

"Yes; I think I know what you mean. What was her manner, generally, in the house? Did she offend the other servants, or did they like her?"

"I think they all loved her, sir. I was the only one who distrusted her—and I could not tell you why I did so, either."

"Because you were jealous of her, doubtless."

"I think so. I think that was the only reason. I know, at least, that it is the only reason that I can give."

"Did your mistress like her? Did she seem fond of her?"

"Yes—and no. Sometimes I thought she was fond of her, and there were times when I had an idea that she disliked her."

"Describe one of the occasions when you had reason to think that your mistress disliked Isabel."

"Miss Mercedes and I came in from the garden, together, through the side door, and we passed through the library into the drawing room to leave some flowers in one of the vases there. Isabel was standing in the embrasure of one of the windows, in conversation with Mr. Orizaba——"

"The man whom Rogers afterward murdered; well, what happened then?"

"Miss Mercedes called to her, and ordered her to her room at once. Then she sent me out of the room, and I know that she said some sharp things to her cousin——"

"But Orizaba was not her cousin."

"He was in a way, sir. A sixth or seventh cousin. She always spoke of him as her cousin. Later, she

came to her room and rang for Isabel, and I heard her tell her that one more circumstance of that kind would incur instant dismissal from her service. That is all I heard her say about it, but the flash of Miss Mercedes' eyes at the time, made me think that underneath it all she heartily disliked Isabel. I may have been mistaken."

"Did you often see Isabel and Orizaba together?"

"Quite often, sir. There was always a glance of mutual meaning between them when they believed themselves unobserved—and once, quite late at night, when I had stolen out of the house to the hammock when the others were in their beds, I saw them talking together on the piazza."

"Now let us get back to the moment you returned to the Fells after your errand to the city. When you stepped forward to speak to your mistress, who was already in the carriage, was Isabel also there—in the carriage?"

"Why—yes, sir."

"Are you sure? Did you see her?"

"Of course, I saw her."

"I mean, did you see her face so that you recognized it, or did you only suppose it to be her, because of the circumstance? Think, now, and reply carefully."

"Why, I have always been certain that it was Isabel, sir."

"Did she not also wear a veil?"

"I really do not know, sir."

"In other words, you did not really look at her at all. You had eyes only for your beloved mistress. Is that not true?"

"Perhaps it is."

"What carriage was it—an open one?"

"No, sir. The big coupé."

"Did you speak to Isabel, or did she address any word to you at that time?"

"No. I think not. I was so surprised, so disturbed, and I will confess, sir, so angry, that I do not remember much about the circumstance, only that Miss Mercedes was going away without me, and that she bade me good-by so coldly that it almost broke my heart."

"So, as a matter of fact, you do not really know that Isabel was in the coupé at all?"

"Why, yes, I do."

"Well, how do you know it? That is what I want to find out."

"Why, who else would be there if she was not?"

"Exactly; who else, indeed?"

"I don't know what you mean by that, sir?"

"No; I suppose you do not. Now what was the first thing you did after you entered the house, when they had driven away?"

"I went to my own room, threw myself on the bed and cried."

"To be sure. Sarah, do you happen to remember if, during the few days that immediately preceded her departure, there had been a strange woman in the house, in any capacity?"

"There was a woman who came to do some light sewing—some hemming of linen, I think; but she went away Saturday evening."

"How do you know that she went away Saturday evening? Did you see her go?"

"No. I heard my mistress dismiss her."

"Now, Sarah, just two or three more questions, and then you may return to the Fells."

CHAPTER VI.

IN HOURLY PERIL OF DEATH.

"Sarah," said the detective, rising and crossing the room two or three times, "the acts connected with the tragedy which occurred at the Fells two weeks ago are still fresh in your memory, are they not? I refer, of course, to the murder of Orizaba by Mr. Reginald's valet, Paul Rogers. You recall all the circumstances, do you not?"

"I think so, sir."

"Now, I want to recall to your attention several things you have told me, to which you have not attached much importance. I want to group them together for your consideration, and, after I have done

so, ask you a few questions upon points suggested by them."

"Very well. I only wish I might be able to tell you something of importance."

"You have already told me several things of very great importance."

"Indeed, sir, I did not know it."

"Possibly not. Now listen."

"Yes, sir."

"You have said that Miss Mercedes seemed startled when she saw Paul Rogers for the first time."

"Yes."

"You have told me that, although Isabel seemed to come to the house without especial recommendation, she seemed not unknown to Orizaba, and that, in fact, there seemed to be an understanding between them."

"Yes; I often thought there was."

"And you have spoken of a rather striking resemblance between your mistress and Isabel."

"It was striking, sir, all but the profile."

"Did it ever strike you that there was also a faint resemblance between Miss Mercedes and the man she called her cousin—Ramon Orizaba?"

"Quite so; her mother used to speak of it often."

"Well, now, did that resemblance extend to Orizaba and Isabel?"

"Yes, sir; decidedly. There was quite general comment about it among the servants."

"What was your own opinion about it?"

"Why, I thought it rather noticeable. I once told Isabel that she might readily pass for Mr. Orizaba's sister."

"What reply did she make?"

"She laughed and said that she was one of those persons who resembled almost everybody or anybody."

"Humph! Now tell me: What effect did the sudden and tragic death of Orizaba seem to have upon Isabel?"

"None at all that I could notice. I thought she was paler than usual, but we were all of us that. I do not think she acted any differently from the others."

"You have known Miss Mercedes so long and so well that you would notice anything which seemed to affect her, at once, would you not?"

"Surely."

"You know, of course, that Mr. Reginald did not like Orizaba?"

"Certainly. We all knew that. He did not disguise the fact."

"How did Miss Mercedes feel toward him?"

"I think she dreaded him. If she were anybody else, I should have said that she feared him—and yet, she was very gracious to him."

"Do you think, by any possibility that she was in love with him, or that she had ever been in love with him?"

"N-no."

"Why do you hesitate?"

"Because of several contradictory things she did. I used sometimes to think that she despised him; again I would think that she dreaded him; again that she was fond of him. I know that she was very kind to him, and I know, also, that she often supplied him with money. I even know of one occasion when Isabel carried money to him for her, and—that reminds me of one thing which I had totally forgotten. She called him by his first name."

"Who did?"

"Isabel. She called him Ramon when she gave him the money. I think the money surprised me more than the use of the name, and I was incensed because my mistress had trusted her instead of me."

"And so you forgot the use of the first name. All right, Sarah. Now I want you to tell me exactly what you fear might have befallen your mistress—what the fear was that induced you to come to me."

"I don't know, sir. I fear everything. I cannot get it out of my head that some dreadful thing has happened to her. It was not like her to go away like that. It was not like her to bid me good-by as she did. It was totally unlike her to leave such a message for Mr. Reginald."

"And," said Nick, "it was unlike her to pack her trunks in the way she did—to take away the articles she did—to care about her own photographs—to cover

her mouth with her handkerchief when she was bidding you good-by—to have been gone an entire week without sending you word after she said that she would do so—in fact, Sarah, there is nothing connected with her going away that is at all like Mercedes Danton, is there?"

"Not a thing, sir; not one."

"And so you have become frightened lest, in some way, she has been induced to go away against her own wishes and will; lest she has been unduly influenced. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Sarah, if you were ill, and obliged to go to the doctor, would you tell him only half of your troubles, or would you tell him all?"

"I should tell him all, sir. What do you mean by that question?"

"Never mind; answer me another. How do you suppose I manage to earn my living at the detective business?"

"Why, sir, how can I answer that?"

"I will answer it for you. I accomplish that difficult task by understanding perfectly when people are telling me the truth and when they are deceiving me. Now there is a difference between telling a downright lie, and only telling a part of the truth and withholding the remainder. I don't think you have told me a lie, to-day, Sarah, but I am quite sure that you have not told me all the truth. There is something you have kept back—something that I should know."

"Mr. Carter, I——"

"I would not amount to much at my business, Sarah, if I was not sharp enough to discover that much in your conduct this evening."

"But, really, sir, there is nothing more that I can tell."

"Tut-tut, Sarah, there is something more that you can tell me, if you will, and that something is about——who shall I say it is about, Sarah? Shall I say it is about Paul Rogers, the fugitive valet, who murdered Mr. Orizaba, or shall I say that it is about Isabel——or better still, shall I say that it is about both of them?"

"There is nothing more that I can tell, sir."

"Now, Sarah, that is pure obstinacy. I know that there is something more. You could, for example, tell me why it was that your mistress was startled when she beheld Paul Rogers acting as valet to her brother—and you could also explain why you were almost, if not quite, as much astonished yourself."

"One might suppose that you were present at the time, sir."

"Sarah, you were in Europe with your mistress while she was at school there; you know perfectly well that you both knew Paul Rogers at that time, and you know that you would not have known him in a way to have affected you when you saw him again, if his position at that time had been in accordance with his valethood, later; and, therefore, you know that Paul Rogers was not his true name any more than valet was his true position. Who was he when you knew him in Europe, Sarah?"

"There is nothing more that I can tell, sir."

"Not even to save your mistress from probable peril?"

"Not even to save her from positive death, sir," she said, and her lips shut tightly together over her teeth.

"What!" exclaimed Nick. "Is it so serious as all that? This is worse than I supposed. You are keeping the secret because your mistress has sworn you to secrecy, and has charged you never to tell, even to save her life or your own. Is it not so?"

"I have nothing more to tell, sir."

"All right. If your won't, you won't, and I see that you are determined to say no more. But, all the same, Sarah, I will find a way to make you speak, or I will discover what I wish to know in some other manner. You may return to the Fells now. I shall be there in the morning."

Sarah rose to her feet and started toward the door, but before she had crossed the room she stopped and began to sob.

Nick remained silent, watching her, and presently she turned and faced him again.

"I think my heart is breaking, sir," she said. "I do not know what to do."

"There is only one thing for you to do if you would serve your mistress whom you love, and that is to tell me everything you know which will throw light upon this strange disappearance. Has it occurred to you, Sarah, that the woman in the coupé, who put her handkerchief to her mouth when she bade you good-by, was not your mistress at all, but was in reality Isabel Benton, dressed in her clothes? Has it occurred to you that the woman in the other seat of the coupé was not Isabel, but was, in reality, the woman who had been hemming linen in the house and who was sent away—but who did not go—the preceding night?"

"Where, then, was my mistress?"

"Where, indeed?"

"But if she was not in the coupé, where could she have been? She was not in the house."

"No. She was not in the house, because she had been carried out of the house," said Nick.

"Carried out of the house! Oh, God! You don't mean——"

"I don't know what I mean, Sarah, save that she had been spirited away in the night, after you had put her to bed after she had been drugged, or possibly murdered."

"Murdered! My Mercedes? No, no, no! I will not believe it. No, no, no, no."

"If she was not murdered then, Sarah, rest assured that she is in hourly peril of death," said Nick, slowly. "The conspirators who dared to take her away, and who dared to plot the substitution of another in her place, will not hesitate to put her out of the way the moment they can do so with safety."

CHAPTER VII.

A QUESTION OF FOUR LIVES.

Sarah tottered back into a chair after Nick had ceased speaking, and she remained there, with her head resting in her hands, and quietly sobbing until the detective addressed her again.

"Come, come, Sarah, this will not do at all," he said. "Remember what I said to you—that I shall be at the Fells in the morning. You can have from now until then to think over all that we have talked about, and to decide upon the importance of the additional knowledge you can supply. I think, by morning, you will have decided to tell me all."

"Very good, sir. I will go; and to night, on my knees, I will pray for guidance so that I may decide to do what is right in the morning."

"All right. Let it remain that way, until you see me to-morrow."

"Tell me, sir, do you think she is in immediate danger?"

"I am only groping in the dark about her now, Sarah, but I think there is a deeply laid plot here, that is destined to affect the entire family of Dantons. The mother was taken ill suddenly, and her son believes that she was poisoned. She is better now, and, probably, out of the reach of her enemies. I would not be surprised to hear, almost any day, of the death of Reginald's father, who has about concluded his European trip, and must be on the point of returning home, especially since he has heard of the tragedy at his house and must know how it has affected his family; and I would not be surprised to hear of an attempt on the life of Reginald within the next few weeks. Don't you understand, Sarah?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"Why, it is simply that there is a certain woman in the world whom we know as Isabel Benton, who believes that she can personate Mercedes Danton so well that if her father, and mother, and brother were out of the way she would have no difficulty in deceiving the rest of the world. It is all very simple—awfully simple after what you have unconsciously revealed to me to-night—all of which I think I should have sensed before this, and which I would have done, had my mind been upon it. Go home now, Sarah. Be prepared to tell me all you know, in the morning. I can wait until then, but I charge you, if you would save the lives, not only of your mistress but of your mistress' father, mother and brother, keep no secrets back from me. It is no longer a question of one life, or two; it is a question of four lives—four human lives, which

these fiends coldly intend to sacrifice to their greed for wealth and luxury."

As soon as Nick was alone, he repaired to the telephone and called up the favorite club of Reginald Danton.

"Mr. Danton has just gone out," he was told, "but he said that he would return in half an hour. No; he did not say where he was going, but I think over to the Waldorf."

"All right," said Nick. "If he comes in ask him to wait for the gentleman who met him at the Fifth Avenue front of the Waldorf just before dark this evening."

For a moment, after he hung up the 'phone, he stood with his hands behind him, in deep thought; and then he hurried to his dressing room, from which, after a quarter of an hour he emerged, but so altered in appearance that he bore not the slightest resemblance to himself.

He was now, in every feature of his make-up, a typical Frenchman—a Boulevardier with a title or two to his name and ample time and money at his disposal. As he sauntered out upon the street, he murmured to himself:

"If Danton is at the Waldorf I will run across him there; if he is not, I can look him up at his club later."

When he arrived at the hotel he entered by the Thirty-third Street door and strolled slowly through the building toward the office. From there he made the rounds of the corridors and also peered into several of the rooms, but nowhere did he get a glimpse of the man he sought. It was evident to him that if Reginald had indeed come to the Waldorf, he had already taken his departure.

Now, it so happens that the Waldorf is a hotel where one rarely takes the trouble to examine the register—indeed, it is rarely in evidence; and they keep three or four on tap, as it were, so that there is always one in which you may write your name while the others are in use by the bookkeepers.

Nevertheless, it so occurred, that as Nick was passing the desk in the office, one of the registers was lying idle on the counter near the registry clerk's window.

Without any object whatever in view, save only the thought of killing time, Nick paused, and, having turned the book around, drew it toward him.

He scanned the names without motive and without even comprehending those he read, idly turning the pages of the book backward, until suddenly he started—violently, for him, although the start was wholly inside and would not have been noticed by a person beside him—nevertheless he started, for, written upon the register in rather a bold but plainly a feminine chirography, he read the name:

"Miss Mercedes Danton.
"Two maids."

He glanced hastily at the top of the page to discover the date of registry, and also made a mental note of the number of the suite placed against the names, and then he stepped away again and dropped into one of the big armchairs to think.

The date of the registry was exactly one week old, showing that the entry had been made the very day when Mercedes was supposed to have disappeared from her home, and Nick smiled when he thought how thoroughly a person may disappear from view in the very heart of New York by simply going to a hotel and by giving orders that you are not "in" to anybody while in town. It is only necessary after that to remain in one's room.

"Now here is a remarkable circumstance," mused Nick. "If I am right in my conjectures, the woman who is masquerading as Mercedes Danton is in this hotel at the present moment, and she has managed in some way so to hedge herself about that she has not

the least fear of what may happen, even if her name is discovered on the register—which it is not likely to be, save through some such accident as mine. To prove that, I will go to the room clerk and inquire for her."

He sauntered up to the desk and asked:

"Is Miss Danton stopping here? Miss Mercedes Danton?"

"No. Gone. Went away a week ago," replied the clerk, shortly, and without raising his eyes. But Nick was satisfied. He returned to his chair and reseated himself.

"It is quite evident," he mused, "that I have received the stereotyped answer prepared for any person who happens to inquire for Mercedes Danton. It is also equally evident to me that she is at this moment in this hotel—that is, the woman who represents herself to be Miss Danton, and that instead of wasting my time in running after her brother, I had better look into this matter here and now."

He crossed the corridor to the locality of the pneumatic tubes which are used as mediums of communication with the upper floors, and asked one of the clerks there to tell him the exact location of the suite he wanted to find, and then he made his way through the building to what is known as the Waldorf side of the hotel and so ascended in the elevator.

Having stepped out at the floor he had desired, he sauntered carelessly through the corridor, passed the door, continued on his way to the far end of the hall, and then retraced his steps. Then, having taken note of the number of the room directly opposite the one that was occupied by the woman he quested, he descended again to the ground floor and went out of the building.

He hurried at once to his own house, and, without altering his disguise, for it served as well as any for the work he had in view, he hastily packed a grip that was literally pasted over with tags and labels.

Nick Carter had determined upon one of the boldest moves of his career, as will soon be seen—a move, too, for which many of his critics might be inclined to censure him, since it involved entrance to a woman's room without her permission—but, yet, he was convinced that the end he had in view justified the means that were necessary to accomplish it.

Even when he began the packing of his grip, he hesitated; but assured as he was that four lives were in immediate peril, he cast his scruples to the winds and continued with his preparations.

The articles with which he supplied his grip, were simply such as he might find it necessary to use in the work he had to do, and in a surprisingly short space of time from the moment he entered his house he left it again—but not, however, before he had made use of the telephone to call up the manager of the Waldorf and ask if he could be accommodated with a certain room, and he gave the number of the one directly opposite the entrance to the suite that was charged against the name of Mercedes Danton.

The reply to his request was all that he could desire, and, accordingly, he returned, grip in hand, to the Waldorf, without delay.

Fifteen minutes after entering the hotel, he was assigned to the room he sought, and had sent up his grip.

The time was as yet early in the evening—barely ten o'clock—and as at least two hours must elapse before he could commence operations as he had planned them, he determined to walk over to the club which Reginald Danton most frequented, and, perhaps, in that manner kill two birds with one stone—that is, see him and give him the warning he had intended to convey before he discovered the name of his sister on the register, and so been forced to alter his plans.

But even while he was standing near the desk, turning over his plans for the night in his mind, he heard

the voice of Reginald behind him, and saw him saunter through the corridor in the direction of the café, in company with two others.

"Good," said Nick to himself, and he followed them, noticed where they seated themselves, and then, returning, sent a boy to tell Reginald that a gentleman wished to speak with him at the desk.

Reginald appeared in a moment and stood looking vacantly around him in search of a familiar face, but, seeing none, was about to return to his friends when Nick touched him on the shoulder.

Reginald Danton wheeled instantly and confronted Nick. A frown appeared on his face, and was then succeeded by a smile, for, after all, he thought, this stranger might be the person who had sent for him.

"You wished to speak to me?" asked Reginald.

"Yes," replied Nick, in his natural tones, although in a low voice. "Tut-tut, Danton, don't look so surprised. You recognize my voice, of course."

"Yes; but it is the only thing about you that I do recognize," said Danton.

"Naturally, since it is all I wished you to do. But stroll with me through the corridor for a moment. I want to talk to you."

CHAPTER VIII.

UP AGAINST IT IN EITHER CASE.

"I was never so astonished in my life," said Danton, as they walked arm in arm together along the hotel corridor. "Of course, I have heard that you could step up and hold conversations with your best friends without once giving them a chance to recognize you, but I never believed it, you know. I always thought that sort of thing was what the boys call 'Sherlock-Holmesing,' don't you know. Very pleasant to read about, but not an element of real life. Just speak again, won't you, for I am not sure yet that you are really Nick Carter; I'm not, really."

"I'm not Nick Carter, Danton—at least, not for the present. I am the Marquis de St. Cyr. At least, that is the name by which I have registered on the books of the hotel."

"And why, may I ask?"

"Rather, for the moment, let me ask the questions. Are you especially addicted to the two gentlemen who are with you?"

"Eh?"

"Who is with you?"

"Oh. Nobody in particular. They are only time-killers. The fact is I have been so upset since that episode of the carriage, when I thought I saw my sister, that I cannot get the idea out of my head that she is here in this hotel. I was glad of any excuse for sitting around here for an hour or so."

"Even though you sat in the café where there is not the slightest possibility that you will see her if she is here?" asked Nick.

"Yes; even so. Oh, I haven't the faintest idea that I will see her again, you know."

"Let me ask you, Danton, if, when you use the pronoun 'her,' you mean your sister, or the woman you saw in the cab and whom you thought was your sister?"

"You seem to be mighty well convinced that she was not Mercedes."

"I am as positive as I can be without having established the truth of my statement."

"Well, whether the woman I saw was Mercedes or somebody else, I cannot get it out of my head that she is here in this hotel."

"She is here in this hotel."

"Ah! You know, then?"

"Yes."

"How did you find out?"

"Never mind that now. Come, let us return to your friends. You may introduce me as an old friend from Paris, the Marquis de St. Cyr—and then, as soon as

it is politely convenient, I want you to shake them and give your attention to me. I have suddenly determined to initiate you into real detective work to-night."

"Eh? Do you mean that you want me to help you?"

"Just that, if you are game and care to do so. If you think I may depend upon your discretion and—sand."

"Sure thing, Carter! You may depend upon both."

It was midnight when they had parted from the friends of Reginald Danton and had repaired to the room to which Nick had been assigned; and then, in a low tone, but with great earnestness, Nick outlined what he intended to do and the manner in which Danton could assist him.

"To begin with, Danton," he said, "you had scarcely left my house before Sarah Kearney put in an appearance, and from her I have gleaned enough of the facts connected with the departure from home to assure me that she has been made the victim—or rather one of the intended victims—of a very deep plot which includes your whole family. Then, my young friend, I was seeking you in order to warn you to be especially on your guard, when quite by accident I discovered that Mercedes Danton and two maids are registered here at this hotel. In fact, they are at this moment occupying the suite that is directly opposite this one."

"Gee whizz! Is that so?"

"Quite so. Now listen to me quietly and patiently, and I will tell you how I have sized up the circumstances connected with the events that have happened in your family lately—and what I want you to do to help me to-night."

"Go ahead, old man. What is it?"

"In the first place you must understand that the man has never been born into the world who is always right; I am not an exception to the rule, and while I believe in the theories I have worked out from what has been told to me, there is always the possibility that I may be wrong. Now, Danton, it is highly important that I should enter that room opposite us, before morning——"

"Eh? What the dev——"

"Wait. I must know before daylight if the woman in that room is your sister, or an impostor. If she is really your sister, then there is nothing more for me to do in the premises, save to await the morning and then send up my card in the usual way in the hope that she will receive me in the interests of her brother."

"Well; and if she is not——?"

"If she is not your sister—why, then, I know already who she is, and I will not be long in determining how to act."

"If she is not my sister, who is she?"

"Isabel Benton."

"The devil you say!"

"Well, if I am right in my conjectures, a sort of a she-devil, I grant you."

"But, I mean——"

"I know exactly what you mean; better than you do yourself—but don't let us get away from the main subject until I have finished what I have to say on that point."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Well, then, in plain English, if by any possibility I am mistaken, and the woman in that room is Mercedes Danton, I tell you frankly that I would rather be shot than to enter there without her permission. You see——"

"Wait half a minute, Carter. I want to ask you a question."

"All right. What is it?"

"This: If it were any other woman on top of the great green earth, not my sister—any other woman in the world except Mercedes Danton, would you feel any

hesitation about entering her room, if you considered the act as a necessary part of your duty?"

Nick looked calmly into his companion's eyes and replied, slowly:

"No; I don't think I should hesitate."

"Good! I understand you, Carter, better than you think. Now another question: If Mercedes Danton were not in question, you would not even stop to consider that your premises in this case are correct, would you?"

"No; I don't think I should."

"That's all right, Nick, old man. It would seem that I was not so far wrong as one might suppose when I teased Mercedes and she was angry. But we'll drop all that now. You had got as far as saying that you would rather be shot than enter that room under certain circumstances. Go ahead from there."

"If by any chance your sister is in that room, why, it would be no great crime for her brother to enter it without her knowledge, just to ascertain if she is really there, while, for me to do so, would be——"

"Terrible, eh? Let it go at that. But, I say; do you think for a moment that I'm going to burgle that room?"

"That is exactly what I expect you to do."

"It strikes me that the shoe is on the other foot now, with a vengeance."

"How so?"

"Why, this way: If I burgle the room, and it is my sister's room, no harm is done. If I burgle it and it is not my sister's room, then the devil is to pay."

Nick laughed outright.

"If you enter the room and my sister is there," continued Danton, "you are up against it, and if I enter the room and my sister is not there, I am up against it."

Nick Carter's face suddenly became grave.

"We are wasting precious time, Reginald," he said. "Now I want you to listen while I tell you a story."

"All right, old chap. Go ahead."

"Carry your mind back to the time when you first engaged Paul Rogers as your valet."

"Hello! Harking back to that, eh?"

"Yes. Be serious now, for it is a very serious matter."

"Well?"

"How was he first brought to your notice so that you were inclined to take him into your service?"

"I think he was recommended to me through Orizaba; through some friend of his, if I remember correctly."

"I had scarcely hoped for so good a reply as that."

"What do you mean?"

"Did Orizaba tell you that he personally knew Rogers?"

"No; I remember distinctly that he assured me he had never seen him."

"Now, in the light of all that occurred later—the murder of Orizaba and the written confession of Rogers, together with his flight, little things have gone out of your mind. I want to know if in the beginning of Rogers' employment in your service, you ever noticed any sign that passed between him and Orizaba by which you might be led to suppose that they were not unknown to each other?"

"No. I never saw a thing; but then I would be the last person in the world to see such a thing, even if it existed."

"Now, one more question and then I will tell my story. Did it ever occur to you that Rogers and the maid, Isabel Denton, were unduly more than mere fellow servants in your household?"

"Sure! He was dead stuck on her. I bantered him about it often—when I was half full."

"Good. Now I will tell the story."

"I hope it is as good as the introduction is exciting."

"Good or not, it is logical. It is wholly made up from my practice of putting two and two together, but the more I have thought about it, the more convinced I have become that it is correct."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLOT FOR MANY MILLIONS.

"You have told me nothing of the real relation of Ramon Orizaba to your family, save that he was a distant cousin," began Nick, slowly, "and it is not necessary, in order to carry out my theory, that you should do so. The point is that he was a relation, however distant, and on your mother's side, since you have told me that she is of Spanish descent."

"Correct. He was——"

"Never mind; we will call him a distant cousin. I think, Danton, if he had shaved off his mustache and the pointed beard he wore, you would have speedily discovered that there was a strong facial resemblance between that man and your mother."

"Oh, yes. She spoke of it often; and so, for that matter, did he."

"As little as I saw of him, the resemblance was plain to me. Now there was another person in that house who bore a striking resemblance to Orizaba."

"Do you mean my sister?"

"No. It was not noticeable in her case, I think, although the person whom I am about to mention as looking like him, also resembled your sister. I mean Isabel Benton."

"By Jove, you are right!"

"My theory tells me, in short, that Isabel Benton and Ramon Orizaba were brother and sister."

Benton whistled softly to himself.

"It goes still farther," continued Nick. "We will say that the relation between Orizaba and your mother did exist, in fact, and that thus far he was not an impostor."

"Yes."

"Beginning at that point we must go back to the time when Orizaba first discovered that the relationship existed, and that his American relatives were rich. We will picture him as—what he doubtless was—a sort of half adventurer, half gentleman, who lived by his wits, as he did not cease to do after he made the acquaintance of your mother. Discovering, we will say, that he was blessed with rich relatives in America, he made himself known to them, and, by his adroitness, won himself into a position of recognition. It appears, and quite plainly as you know, that your mother and sister supplied him with an allowance out of their own funds. Your sister did this to please her mother, and your mother did it for the honor of her family—because he was a blood relation, however distant, and she would not consent that he should incur the contempt of her husband and son."

"I guess that is about right, Nick."

"The sums with which they supplied him were, however, not sufficient for his needs, and, being aware of your proverbial carelessness in money matters, he did not hesitate to forge an occasional check in your name. This, I think your sister knew about; perhaps your mother also knew it. It was the fear that he would repeat that act too often and so be discovered, which led your sister to give him more money, and often—for I find through Sarah that she did so.

"Now—you have intimated, in the past, that Orizaba had the temerity to make advances for the hand of Mercedes, in marriage. That is the real reason why you hated him, for, otherwise you would have liked him. You have told me yourself that everybody did like him—that he had a way of ingratiating himself into the good graces of everybody."

"It is true, too."

"Mercedes doubtless gave him to understand that there was no hope for him in that direction, and so he turned his attention to another matter—one that had presented itself to him from the first moment when he met your sister, but one which he did not seriously consider until he knew that there was no hope that she would ever consent to be his wife.

"But, then, he recalled the fact that he had a sister—and what is more important, that the ties of blood had barked back as it will sometimes strangely do, so that with a little assistance from the arts of dress and of making-up, there was a resemblance between them sufficiently marked so that under proper conditions one might readily pass for the other. It remained, therefore, only necessary to bring about those conditions.

"We will say that he communicated with his sister. That they met and the whole plan and plot was outlined between them. That she was brought out of obscurity somewhere, and, after some necessary coaching, was introduced into your home in the capacity of maid to Mercedes. It was a simple matter for her to dress so that the resemblance to her mistress should be as little noticeable as possible. The very accomplishment she wished to make use of later on, was covered with every art she could employ, so that it was hardly to be seen at all while she was in the house, save at rare intervals. One of those rare intervals I know about, as well as the fact that she delighted to practice in the part of masquerading as Mercedes. Sarah surprised her once, dressed in your sister's clothing, and standing before a glass engaged in studying her part, in character.

"Now, we have that much, and we will take a step backward again.

"After the murder of Orizaba, you know I went through his papers very thoroughly. I found the story of the Nemesis, as you know, and Rogers' letter developed the fact that he was that interesting character. But here is a nice little point in the plot—or, rather, two very nice points: Orizaba did not suspect that Rogers was the Nemesis who had been pursuing him for so long a time, for the reason that Rogers was all the time the husband of Orizaba's sister, Isabel. Don't you see?"

"Not quite. There are wheels within wheels there."

"Very well, we will say that ten years ago Rogers took the trail of Orizaba, intending to kill him. In pursuing him, he encountered Isabel, the sister of his intended victim. He fell in love with Isabel, and married her. Having done that, he posed thereafter as the fond brother-in-law, while in reality he was the Nemesis who was bleeding Orizaba all the while, and who had sworn some day to have his life. Why, we do not know, and it does not matter; but that is why, try as he might, Orizaba could never discover the identity of the man who pursued him.

"Now, let us take another step backward. We will say that one day Orizaba confided his plot to Rogers; that he told him of the strong likeness between Mercedes Danton and Isabel. With their heads together, it was an easy matter for those two men to work out the plot by which, ultimately, they were together to enjoy all the millions that your own father has amassed, and which one day are intended to be divided between you and Mercedes. They were not working for one million, but for a hundred millions. Think of it, Danton; it was a game worth playing, and worthy of the brains they put into it."

"By Jove, Nick! But how——"

"Wait. Rogers was introduced into your service as a valet, in order to study the lay of the land, so to speak, before he would consent that his wife should become involved. Later, his wife, Orizaba's sister, the woman whom we know as Isabel Benton, was introduced forward as maid to Mercedes. The game was [illegible]

only remained for Isabel to study her part until she had it learned to perfection, and then to fire the mine."

"But, I say, Nick, you don't mean to say that she believed she could fool me—to say nothing of my father and mother—do you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then how——"

"You, as well as your father and mother were condemned to death."

"Good Heaven!"

"With you three out of the way it would be an easy matter to deceive others. When the little matter of the quarrel, which amounted to nothing, occurred between you and Mercedes, Isabel overheard it, doubtless, and as the time was ready to act, she acted. She had already started her warfare against your mother. You say you thought your mother was poisoned by something she had eaten. I have no doubt that she was, only I have many doubts that it was accidental. The poison was somehow administered by Isabel, and in getting your mother out of the house, she did what she wanted to do; for she opened the opportunity for her own disappearance after which there were other ways in which you and your mother were to be gotten rid of after some approved plan which offered small chance of detection. Isabel was establishing an alibi for herself, as well as for your pseudo sister. You would have had another Cadillac needle jabbed into you back on the street somewhere, your mother would have been poisoned again while she is in Newport, and your father—well, he may or he may not get home alive. Let us hope that he will; that the time is not yet ripe to play their pet upon him, and if our work to-night is good, I hope we can prevent the further working of the plot against you."

"Hush! Don't interrupt me yet. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to prevent the happening of the things I have mentioned, except what we have elected to do to-night. Now let us take one more step backward.

"We will say that we are almost at the time for the culmination of the plot. We will say that we can look in upon a reverie of Rogers wherein he cogitates upon the mightiest stroke of all. He hates Orizaba. More than that, he fears him. Still more, with Orizaba out of the way there will be one less person to enjoy the millions of your father when they shall have been won. Still more yet, there is a chance that by murdering Orizaba, he can throw suspicion upon you, Danton, and this he decides to do. That later he changed his mind on that point is one of the psychological puzzles of the human mind. I won't pretend to answer that, unless it was the thought that he could still further divert suspicion from himself in the final crimes, if, by chance, suspicion should ever fall upon him. In putting Orizaba out of the way, Isabel was both neutral and passive. There had never been affection between them, nor did she delight in the thought that her brother would be master of that future in which she wished to be the queen.

"There! That is the story I have woven from the somewhat tangled thread provided by Sarah Kearney. Now I come down to the night of the disappearance of Mercedes.

"Sarah put her to bed as usual, Saturday night. Sunday morning, Sarah was sent away upon a cooked-up errand. When she returned, the baggage had been taken from the house, and her mistress, as she supposed, was in the act of driving away in the coupé. As a matter of fact, Reginald, it was Isabel who was inside the coupé, posing as Mercedes, and it was a woman who had been introduced into the house to do hemming on linen who was acting the part of Isabel."

"Where, then, was Mercedes?"

"I can only guess at the reply, but there is no doubt in my mind that she had been drugged and taken se-

cretly from the house during Saturday night, and—I say, Danton, the registry downstairs shows two maids. What if one of those maids is your sister, still under the influence of drugs? What if, after all, she is in that room across the hall?"

CHAPTER X.

THE PLOTTERS BROUGHT TO BAY.

It was past one o'clock when the detective had finished his story, and as he brought it to an end, he glanced at his watch, then shut it to with a snap and announced that it was time to act.

"I know the plan of the interior of this house quite well," he said, to Danton, "and it will be comparatively easy for me to unlock the door so that you can gain admittance to those rooms. There are five rooms in the suite, and I merely wish you to satisfy yourself that Mercedes is there, or is not there, and then to return to me to report. I will do the rest."

"But, suppose they should hear me?"

"Then the only thing for you to do is to make your escape and to dart into this room as quickly as you can. Come; are you ready? Here; let me adjust this wig and beard, so that if you should be seen you will not be known. So. Come on."

Nick opened the door, and, after directing Danton to remain where he was until he was ready for him to proceed, crossed the hall and applied his marvelous pick-lock to the door.

It was a matter of only a moment for him to spring back the lock, and gently to push the door ajar, in the meantime having assured himself by a quick glance up and down the hall that there was no immediate fear of interruption.

As the door upon which he was working swung open not more than half an inch, he could hear voices proceeding from the room which adjoined that one, and he could see, also, by the light which reflected into the room before him, that it was itself unoccupied.

The voice that had arrested his attention was a man's voice, and, turning, he made a hasty gesture toward Danton to remain where he was, and then stepped boldly through, closing the door behind him. The presence of a man in the room and the instant recognition of the tones of that man's voice, had driven all thought of the delicacy of his undertaking from his mind at once.

For Nick Carter, to hear a voice once, was always to remember it, and the instant those tones fell upon his ear, he knew that he was in the presence of the master conspirator, in short, that the man, Rogers, was at that very moment at his mercy.

Having closed the door gently, he dropped upon the floor and crawled forward until he could peer through a crack between the folding doors which connected the two rooms, and he almost exclaimed aloud when his eyes lighted upon the scene thus unfolded to his view.

At the first glance it seemed almost as if Mercedes herself was seated there, conversing with Rogers; so exact a copy had she managed to produce of the young woman she had plotted to impersonate. But even as Nick took in the details of her appearance, she spoke, and she did so with the voice of Isabel Benton.

"Oh, no," she was saying. "I will experience no difficulty in getting her away from this hotel. Give yourself no uneasiness on that score. I have already made every arrangement. The doctor has given his opinion, the management of the hotel is ready to assist me in taking her out as quietly as possible. They are no more anxious to make an exhibition of a sick guest than I am of a sick maid; and Paul, her own brother, would not know her, she is so wasted and changed. I don't know what the drug is that you gave me to administer to her, but, whatever it is, it has done its work well. Mercedes Danton, the real, poor

out of existence to-morrow when we ship her off to Canada. After that, you can put her out of existence in fact, at your own sweet pleasure. I wash my hands of it."

"And your part here? What will you do?"

"Oh, I'll play my part all right. Don't worry about me. You say the servant whom you have 'fixed' at the house in Newport, where the old lady is staying, will do her work this week, and that Mrs. Danton is too ill to travel here now. Well, that means that I have nothing to fear from that source; and Danton here—if your plans do not fail in regard to him——"

"They cannot fail. He will die on shipboard on the way over, of apoplexy, or of something that will look much like it. They haven't time to hold autopsies on ocean steamers. I'll take care of that. The steward who is to put him out of the way has worked for me before; he will not fail. But what of the son?"

"You leave the son to me. He has just twenty-four hours more to live and then, pouf! He goes out of existence. Thus all the obstacles are removed. Thus we will come into the millions."

"You are a great actress, Isabel. You play the part superbly. Even now—here—to me—you look it thoroughly."

"Play the part? It is thrice easier than it was to play the maid. That was hard. But, come. You must be going."

Nick waited to hear no more after that, but he turned and glided back to the door, and in another moment was again in the hall, with it closed and locked behind him.

With a hasty word of warning and instruction to Danton, who retreated within the room, Nick sauntered down the corridor a few steps, waiting till the door of the suite supposed to be occupied by Mercedes Danton and her maids should open to permit the departure of Paul Rogers—and he had not long to wait.

When the man came out into the hall, and closed the door behind him, Nick was not ten feet away from him, and, as Rogers, after one sharp glance in his direction, turned to hasten in the opposite direction, Nick quickened his step so that in a moment he was close beside the conspirator and murderer.

He seemed to be in the act of passing Rogers, when suddenly he turned in his track.

His arms shot out and the fingers of one hand seized upon Rogers' throat, effectually shutting off all hope of his crying out or otherwise giving an alarm. With the other hand, the detective seized him around the body and then, with a leap, he hurried him toward the open door of his own room where Danton was standing in the doorway awaiting him.

The whole thing occurred so quickly that five seconds had not elapsed from the instant when Rogers came out of the room opposite, before he was safely behind closed doors in Nick Carter's room, with irons upon his wrists and ankles and a gag thrust into his mouth.

"This is the luckiest night's work I ever did in my life," said Nick, looking down upon his captive, who was glaring up at him with fierce eyes, but who was utterly helpless nevertheless.

"I see that you do not know me, Paul Rogers," he said. "Perhaps, however, you will know this gentleman;" and he brought Danton forward where the prisoner could see him.

"The game is up, Rogers," continued Nick. "I think I can assure you that Mr. Danton's father will not die of apoplexy on board the ship which is to bring him over here; also that his mother in Newport will not be poisoned this week, and also that Reginald will live somewhat more than twenty-four hours more. Neither do I think that Mercedes Danton, the real, as

your wife correctly calls her, will take that little trip to Canada."

"What the devil does it all mean?" asked Danton, almost beside himself with curiosity.

"It means," replied Nick, "that when I opened the door opposite, I heard Rogers' voice inside the room, so I thought that instead of sending you there to reconnoiter, I would do the thing myself. I happened, fortunately, to surprise a heart-to-heart talk between this chap and Isabel, in which, in a very few words, they betrayed the whole plot, almost exactly as I outlined it to you. And, by the way, Reginald, I don't blame you for supposing that Isabel was your sister when you saw her in front of the hotel in the carriage. I would have believed the same had I seen her instead of you. Now, I want you to sit here with our gentle acquaintance while I go down and interview the management of the hotel. This is one of the circumstances which they like to manage in their own way, and when I tell them that it need not be known that anything has occurred in the hotel, there will be no difficulty in getting our prisoners to police headquarters without delay."

"But where is Mercedes? Where is my sister? Has anything happened to her? You have not told me that yet, Nick?"

"To be sure I haven't; but do you suppose that if anything had happened to her, I would be almost joking with this brute here on the floor? Wait, Danton. She is under the influence of drugs, and is, doubtless, quite ill; but I think we will soon bring her out of that."

* * * * * * *

Half an hour later there was a sharp summons upon the door of the suite opposite the room where Nick Carter had related the story to Reginald Danton.

Presently, after the summons had been repeated a second and a third time, there came a voice from the other side, inquiring who was there.

"A telegram," replied the hotel detective, whereupon he was told to wait a moment, and presently the door was partly opened and the face of Isabel—it was uncannily like the face of Mercedes—appeared in the opening.

But she had no time to ask questions, for the door being ajar thus far, was quickly pushed wide open by the men outside, and almost before the woman was thoroughly awake, she found herself a prisoner.

It was broad daylight, in the same suite of rooms at the hotel.

Mercedes Danton, pale as a ghost, but seemingly more beautiful than ever, was lying on the couch near the window so that the cooling breeze of the June morning could fan her brow. Seated beside her and holding her hand in his, was her brother, and standing near them, looking down with untold pleasure and satisfaction in his eyes, was the great detective, Nick Carter.

"How much we owe to you, Mr. Carter," she said to him, lifting her matchless eyes until they rested upon his face with a glance that was almost a caress.

"To me?" he replied, smiling. "Say, rather, to yourself."

"How to me?" she inquired.

Nick turned away without answering, and Reginald smiled upon both his sister and his friend.

"How to me?" she repeated, looking at her brother for a reply.

"Why," he said, smiling, "because everybody who knows you, loves you, Mercedes. Even I, your brother, love you. Even——"

"Shut up, Danton," ordered Nick. "Speak for yourself, and give the same privilege to others."

THE END.

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, will be No. 300, and will be entitled "The Millionaire's Nemesis; or, Paul Rogers' Oath of Vengeance."

This story will tell of the escape from the clutches of the law of the murderer whom we have known as Paul Rogers. His real character will be revealed, and the wonderful plotting between himself and the beautiful Isabel against the life and happiness of Reginald Danton and his sister, Mercedes, will be unfolded. Nick Carter has often said that he never had to do with a more accomplished villain, and one more expert in villainous craft, than Paul Rogers. Read it!

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